Prepare for disasters, disabled urged

Today's Sunbeam Saturday, October 27, 2007 By Colleen P. Moore

Pennsville Twp. – If a chemical or natural disaster occurs and residents in Salem County have to be evacuated, there will be local and state agencies ready to assist them- but residents also have to help themselves.

The Salem County Office of Disabled is kicking off awareness of a new Special Needs Registry for emergency evacuations in conjunction with the Office of Emergency Management.

It tells first responders- police, fire, sheriff's officers, emergency medical services, health department personnel and others- who disabled residents are, their needs, and how to get to them.

"This is the day that we roll out with this and introduce it to the public," said Debra Behnke, director for the Office of Disabled, at a seminar held at the Riverview Inn Friday morning on emergency preparedness for the disabled.

When the Office of Disabled was created three years ago, Behnke said creating this registry was one of her early initiatives.

"Nationwide, this issue is at the forefront," she said. "It's important for us to take a proactive approach because of our location. Things happen fast."

Everything that surrounds Salem County and where a possible accident could take place prompting an evacuation was stressed at the

seminar- water, three nuclear plants, DuPont, other industries, major highways and a railroad system.

There are also natural disasters like hurricanes or tornadoes.

The Special Needs Registry database is free, confidential, and voluntary.

There are 12,000 disabled residents in Salem County, and those with a temporary disability can also register. That is a large number considering the population at the last Census was only a little more than 64,000.

Through outreach and education, Behnke hopes to get as many people as possible involved.

"This program is so valuable," Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-3rd Dist. said before a crowded banquet room. "This could happen. We may have to move people."

Safety can't be taken for granted, he said.

"It could turn at the snap of a finger," he said. "This stuff is very real."

He said that while they hope they never have to use the registry or any evacuation plan, it isn't a waste of time to talk about being prepared.

"The events in California in the last week remind us that tragedy can strike in an instant," said Freeholder Director Lee Ware. "Salem County is committed to ensuring no one is left behind."

The county is only the second in the state to hold an emergency preparedness seminar aimed at the disabled.

One of the speakers was Sgt. Bryan Everingham of the New Jersey State Police, which overseas emergency management in the state and assists in areas like aviation, K-9 units and search and rescue.

He is the coordinator for Salem County.

While people see troopers on the road daily, there is a lot of behindthe-scenes work that they play in emergency management locally, Everingham said.

He said they use an "all hazards" approach to preparations to make sure they can handle any situation, whether it's a chemical spill, flood or fire.

To better ensure they can help residents, they need to know who can't evacuate on their own, he said.

"We cannot help you if we don't know where you are and how to get to you," he said. "I would encourage you to do your part so we can help you if we ever have the misfortune of having to evacuate."

Other speakers included representatives from PSEG Nuclear, DuPont Chambers Works, the Salem County Chapter of the American Red Cross, and the Salem County Department of Health.

Some people received a red ticket when they registered for the seminar and got a free "Go Bag" provided by the Red Cross.

Mariana Leckner, from Leckner Consulting, explained the bags carry items needed in case of an evacuation like a flashlight, toilet paper, dust mask, and first aid kit.

"This is a wonderful thing that Salem County is doing," Leckner said.

"It's not everything you need, but it's a good start."

She urged people to make their own emergency kits at home and personalize them to what their special needs are, including a sheet with medical information like doctors and prescriptions.

She added that each individual is still responsible for their own preparations.

"If you have a kit ready (when someone comes), it gives emergency personnel more time to help more people," she said.

Pat Spring, deputy director of Salem County Emergency Services, talked about what goes into planning for emergencies.

There are four phases, he said. Those are preparation, response, recovery, and mitigation, and they cover areas like life and property protection, how to alert residents, communicate with the media, and restore infrastructure and livelihoods afterward.

"We plan for what we hope will never happen," he said. "No one is going to be left behind in Salem County. No one."

For more information on the Special Needs Registry, call 935-7510 ext. 8311 or 8316.